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# RESIDENTIAL WINDOW CLEANING: Safety Inside and Out

By Drue Ann Hargis-Ramirez, Write Right Enterprises

"The pace of single-family home construction reached an all-time high of 1.76 million units, [with the South and West leading the way]," according to the National Association of Home Builders ([www.nahb.org](http://www.nahb.org)). In fact, despite the Bureau of Labor Statistics' estimation that residential building would decline in 2005 and 2006, housing starts jumped in January 2005 to the highest level in 21 years. As builders respond to the construction demand, the potential customer base for residential window cleaners grows too.

This growth is good news but don't let the pressure to meet demand affect safety. The biggest mistakes made in window

cleaning are a result of rushing or carelessness, says Ron Friman, Owner/Expert Window Cleaning in Illinois. Ron also teaches route and residential safety for the International Window Cleaning Association ([www.iwca.org](http://www.iwca.org)).

Safety on the job should be the first concern. And it begins even before getting to the job site, says Jonathan Hood, President/Excellent Window Cleaning Inc. in Michigan, and an IWCA Board Member. Safety should encompass regular safety meetings, proper training and certification, applications of standards and codes, and use of the right equipment for the job as well as following manufacturer guidelines

for all equipment. Safety should be at the forefront of every job from beginning to end and for residential window cleaners both inside and out.

## IN-HOUSE SAFETY TRAINING

Section 3.4.1 of the American National Standards Institute's ANSI/TWCA I-14.1 Window Cleaning Safety Standard reads, "Employers and employees shall be proficient in safe working procedures and proper use of equipment." ANSI ([www.ansi.org](http://www.ansi.org)) serves as administrator and coordinator of the United States private sector voluntary standardization system; the ANSI I-14 was adopted in October 2001 and sets the



a crew leader for the first three months. "It is a proactive approach designed to make sure proper procedure is installed in them,"

Jonathan explains. In ten years his company has had only 2-3 minor accidents.



residential safety class being taught by Ron Friman

standard for all window cleaners. In-house safety training can be the first step to meeting the standards outlined in the I-14.

Jonathan Hood runs his new employees through a one-day safety orientation including a review of his company's 70-page safety manual. He compiled the manual after attending an IWCA safety meeting. It includes 49 safety policies and a 30-point checklist from equipment inspection to cleaning procedures. New employees are supervised closely and work directly with

Don Chute is an industry veteran. He believes conducting regular safety meetings with your employees is very important. Don is currently a distributor of waterfed poles for Eagle Power Products ([www.eaglepower.com](http://www.eaglepower.com)),

operating under the name Lead Dog Enterprises, but for more than 20 years he

operated Total Home Care Inc. in Atlanta, Georgia. He recently sold the business, which is now called Total Home Care of Georgia. "Total Home Care [was and] is very big on safety." Don conducted written tests following safety meetings to ensure his employees had read the company safety manual. Don also recommends that each job should have a supervisor to ensure all safety standards are practiced every day.

Jonathan holds monthly safety reviews

and an annual all-day safety event where the entire safety manual is read aloud. His monthly meetings also include a review of seasonal occupational hazards. For example, in October, they cover ladder safety affected by wet ground conditions; in December, they cover walking on wet ice.

## STANDARDS AND CODES

The I-14 standard specifies equipment with "practical and adequate safety factors and features," while requiring "safe use, design and maintenance of such equipment." The I-14 is endorsed by both the IWCA and the Building Owners & Managers Association ([www.boma.org](http://www.boma.org)). A guide to understanding the I-14 is available from both organizations. IWCA members can order a copy of the I-14 standard (a 40-page document) through IWCA's website for \$40 (\$55 for non-members).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration ([www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov)) establishes law through codes and regulations. Various sections of OSHA Code 1910 "Occupational Safety and Health Standards", which can be viewed on OSHA's website, apply to window cleaning. Subpart D, for example, applies to



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walking and working surfaces from ladders to scaffolds to manlifts. As mentioned in our high-rise article, the Martin's Window Cleaning Corp. website includes a listing of codes and standards which might be helpful; [www.window-cleaning.com/osha\\_codes.htm](http://www.window-cleaning.com/osha_codes.htm).

Many states have their own OSHA divisions too. You'll need to make sure you follow the standards and codes for your state, which may be more stringent than federal OSHA codes. Links for state partners can be accessed from OSHA's website. For example, California has a Cal/OSHA Program as part of its Occupational Health and Safety Division within the Department of Industrial Relations ([www.dir.ca.gov](http://www.dir.ca.gov)). Their window cleaning requirements can be viewed at "<http://www.dir.a.gov/title8/sb7g1a5.html>".

### SAFE AND SOUND ON THE GROUND

"I think the biggest safety improvement in window cleaning whether residential, or commercial in certain applications, is waterfed poles," says Jeff Klass, Owner/First Klass Window Cleaning in Wisconsin. He uses the DI-Cart from Eagle Power Products. His system uses the customer's outside water source, which flows through the DI tanks. He also purchased both 12- and 30-foot extension poles.

"The last time we used the DI-Cart," Jeff says, "the client raved about how clean the windows were. And the beauty is my feet never left the ground."

The only danger with waterfed poles, according to Don Chute, is hitting a tree and knocking the pole out of your hand and either hurting someone or hitting a live wire. Fortunately, he says, newer homes have the wires underground. You can work around and through trees, but you have to pay

attention to the job. In fact, waterfed poles are the future of exterior window cleaning, Don believes. Some windows, such as double hung windows with storm screens, can't be cleaned with waterfed poles. You'll have to get on a ladder and get a squeegee to the glass for the job.

### LADDER SAFETY AND CHOICE

OSHA Code 1910.26(c)(3)(i) reads "A simple rule for setting up a ladder at the proper angle is to place the base a distance from the vertical wall equal to one-fourth the working length of the ladder." Even more important cleaners need to have three points of contact on ladders at all times. Whether it's two hands and one foot on the ladder or one hand and two feet, there should always be a three-point contact, according to Don Chute.

Storm windows, common in cold weather states, present another safety issue. They may need to be taken down with a suction cup to clean; the suction cup allows the cleaner to have three-point contact with the ladder as they descend. If they are too large, you may need two men on ladders, each carrying down one side of the storm window. In this case, you must be especially careful for the cleaners to stay even as they go down their respective ladders, and make sure no one is below in case the storm window is dropped.

Many believe that extension ladders work best outside and sectional ladders work best for inside work. Extension ladders aren't as easy to move indoors even when collapsed,



*leg leveler*

Jonathan Hood explains. Sectional or piece ladders are convenient because they can extend up to 28 feet. Keep your inside and outside ladders separate so the ones used inside will stay clean. Jonathan prefers sectional ladders from Detroit Sponge and Chamois and he is partial to Ettore products.

Jeff Klass prefers Little Giant ladders. He also uses stand-offs, which is an accessory that clamps to the top of his Little Giant ladders to stabilize them. "A stand-off holds you back off the side of the building so as you go up it is easier to keep your center of gravity. You can almost lean in onto the ladder," he explains. He prefers Little Giants because they flare at the bottom so the base is wider. They are also multi-functional, he says, and adjust in one-foot increments. They can also be used on stairwells because you can adjust one side only.

Don Chute uses leg levelers on his ladders for uneven surfaces. "I wouldn't have a ladder without them. You can set the

ladder level by lowering one of the leg levelers on the ground and the other on the stair." Safety also comes into play when pricing a job, according to Don. "When you do an estimate, take in mind that some windows are going to need two people."

And don't forget to look at the work area, Jeff Klass points out, before you even set up your ladder.



*example of dog-and-leash method*



*poling a skylight*



Look for overhead electrical lines and other obstructions on the ground.

Ron Friman recommends safety rubber pads/shoes for ladders. The bottom of a ladder has rubber plugs on the ends, but these aren't enough to prevent slippage, he says, especially on marble and tile floors. The rubber pads/shoes for ladders can be purchased cheaply from window cleaning equipment suppliers. He also recommends hard-sole work shoes for ladder use. ShoesForCrews.com offers a variety of work shoes for window cleaners.

If using a ladder on decks, which can be slippery from rain or mildew, Don Chute recommends using a 5-1 or putty knife wedged into the deck groove. The ladder can't slide backwards because the putty knife stops it.

There are lots of different ladder types and manufacturers, but it comes down to what you can afford. "Buy the best ladder you can afford [then go one step further]," advocates Ron. He also recommends buying a ladder rated at 250 pounds, which means it can hold 1,000 pounds since the rating is based on a 1-4 ratio.

## FROM LADDER TO ROOFTOP

"One of the most dangerous things window cleaners can do is to get off a ladder onto a roof," Ron says.

Jeff Klass knows personally how dangerous getting onto a residential rooftop can be. Six years ago on a dewy spring morning, while working on a 24,000 square foot home, he slipped 40 feet off a cedar shake roof. He landed on the blacktop below, breaking his right ankle and four bones in his left foot. "I won't risk life and limb for any piece of glass ever again."

Of course, this doesn't mean he isn't climbing on rooftops anymore, but now he uses special footwear called Korkers ([www.korkers.com](http://www.korkers.com)). They have special removable soles onto which special bottoms can be attached, different bottoms for different types of roofing material. He also evaluates roof pitch and if it's too steep he won't get on it. ShoesForCrews.com also offers similar type roofing shoes.

Ron Friman doesn't believe shoes like Korkers keep you safe enough, plus the shoe spikes damage the roof each time you walk on it. When you slip, there is no time to react, in his opinion. He advocates use of a full-body harness with a safety line to restrain you. It is essentially the same system used for rappelling off a building, but the safety line is horizontal.

He refers to it as the dog-and-leash method and explains the safety line is attached from one side of the rooftop to the other with you attached to the rope with a rope grab. He suggests tying one end of the rope to your truck bumper and the other to a tree. In his IWCA safety class he demonstrates the technique with two trained men. Remember to take the keys out of your truck and don't use your customer's vehicle to anchor to.

## GUTTER CLEANING SAFETY

Don Chute had his crew clean gutters from a ladder, using a handheld blower to blow the debris to the ground.

Jonathan Hood prefers to scoop the debris into plastic bags instead of blowing it to the ground. If the roof pitch is acceptable, he will allow his employees to clean the gutters from the rooftop, otherwise a ladder is used. His cleaners also wear eye goggles for splashes and rubber gloves called Winter Monkey Grips. They are made of a tough polyvinyl chloride material with in-

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ulated linings. Every company truck also carries wasp pesticides because wasps may build nests in the gutters.

There are also plastic scoops, offered by TheGutterCleaner.com, which can be screwed onto the end of an extension pole. This may reduce ladder work, but when using the ladder, don't lean it against the gutter or you can dent it.

Ron Friman says to be cautious about downspouts. His cleaners carry a four foot piece of hose and run water down the spout to ensure it's clear. If it's too cold, they drop a couple of pebbles down the spout.

## INSIDE WORK

"A lot of window cleaners don't realize how expensive a residence is," comments Ron Friman. Nor do they realize how expensive the furniture and knickknacks are inside the house, he adds. He advocates teaching your cleaners not to move furniture without a written waiver, and to point out pre-existing conditions on your work order.

When moving furniture or assembling ladders indoors, Jonathan Hood says, always watch for ground and overhead obstructions. Check surface conditions, such as hardwood, tile or carpet and have someone foot the ladder inside on slippery surfaces. His crews also use drop clothes, wear shoe covers over work boots, and put bonnets on ladder tops to prevent scratching the surface onto which the ladder is leaning.

When cleaning the outside of a window from inside, only one-fifth of your body weight can be outside, according to OSHA codes, says Ron. The I-14 goes a step further, he says, and recommends keeping one foot on the ground and your head inside. He currently cleans the housing units at the University of Chicago, but the com-

pany before his had one of their crew fall out a third-floor window (fortunately onto an awning which broke his fall) because too much of his body was hanging outside.

If you're cleaning a skylight from a ladder, you'll have to catch your water or it may drip onto the wall paint. How to do this? Don't use too wet tools, Ron says, and use microfiber rags and scrubbers. "Manage your water. Water can cause damage on carpets or walls or furniture," he adds.

Everyone agrees you need to be aware of where your tools are at all times because of pets and small children. Don points out a small child can drown in a bucket of water. "Keep it close to you at all times." Some common sense also works, Don adds. Turn off the electrical source when cleaning lighted mirrors. Put covers on scrapers when not using them. Never put a ladder or pole in front of a door or stairway. If you have to clean a window over a door, lock the door so no one can come in.

## IWCA SAFETY TRAINING CLASSES

In-house safety training and procedures will serve you well, but the IWCA safety training classes will carry safety the necessary step further to fully protect you and your employees. "I recommend that everyone attend IWCA safety training. It is the most important thing a company can do," says Don Chute.

Jonathan Hood agrees. "If you have a safety training class available in your area, it is worth the money to protect yourself as an owner. You can overlook some things."

IWCA's safety training classes are offered at its annual convention and at regional events throughout the year. A fall event is scheduled on October 15 in Seattle, Washington. An online registration form is already accessible on IWCA's website. The cost is \$129 for the first person and \$119 for additional employees if you register before October 1. Another regional event is tentatively scheduled this summer in Chicago, but the detail and date remain to be determined.

All-day safety training is provided at the annual conventions. Stefan Bright, IWCA's Safety Director, kicks off the training with two hours on safety awareness, then different modules are offered throughout the rest of the day. Ron Friman teaches the route and residential modules. At the conclusion of all the convention safety sessions, Stefan provides a quick review and wraps up the three days worth of safety seminars.



*being respectful of the home*



## IWCA WINDOW CLEANING CERTIFICATION

Three years ago the IWCA formed the International Window Cleaner Certificate Institute ([www.iwcci.org](http://www.iwcci.org)) to conduct its certification program. A company must join the Institute in order to have its employees go through the certification process, explains Stefan Bright. The program includes studying educational workbooks provided by the IWCCI, performing on-the-job hours on certain pieces of equipment including chemicals if applicable, and passing an exam. At the IWCCI website, over 150 companies are listed as members; nearly 100 have been certified to date.

The annual membership fee for a residential window cleaning company is \$250. There are four different levels of certification. The Certified Window Cleaner RR level is for cleaners specializing in ground-based route and residential operations. The individual certification fee is \$200 but it lasts for three years and can be renewed for another three years for only \$100.

### IN THE END

Ron Friman says it all comes down to thinking safely, pre-planning and having the varieties of equipment you need and following the manufacturer guidelines for proper use of the equipment.

Drue can be reached by email at [WriteRightEnt@aol.com](mailto:WriteRightEnt@aol.com).

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